

MYSTIC CREED AND MYSTICAL AWARENESS AS REFLECTED IN THE POETICAL REALM OF WILLIAM WORDSWORTH: AN APPRAISAL

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ABSTRACT

This paper is an attempt to ascertain the fact that William Wordsworth is a mystic poet who wholeheartedly dived deep into Nature to mirror the mystic creed and mystical awareness through his poetry. This paper neatly explores the truth through the verses of Wordsworth that there is some sort of harmony between the spirit in nature and the mind of man. Thus, this paper brings forth the definite concept that Wordsworth shows himself as a mystic by associating himself with nature where he realises the indwelling spirit in Nature.

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INTRODUCTION

Wordsworth's greatness as a poet has almost universally been recognised. One modern critic has called him one of the giants of English poetry, while another has called him a mountain, the most massive in that lofty range which is called the Romantic Revival. Matthew Arnold, the greatest critic of the Victorian age, gave a high rank to Wordsworth by calling him "one of the chief glories of English poetry". In his words, "the poetical performance of Wordsworth, after that of Shakespeare and Milton, undoubtedly the most considerable from the Elizabethan age to the present time (1879)". He is the one who did rebel against the poetic principles of the 18th century by neo-classical poetry, 18th century by holding (a) that the common life of the poor, simple. People can serve as fit material for poetry and (b) then the diction of words and phrases to be employed in poetry shown be drawn from the everyday speech of human being – a formula with which he led the revolt

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against the artificial and bombastic diction of the 18th century new classical poetry (c) further, he wanted to throw a colouring of imagination over the simple material chosen for treatment in poetry. *Michael, The Solitary Reaper, To a Highland Girl*, and several other similar poems illustrate this theory. In fact, Wordsworth effected a revolution in English poetry both as regards its subject-matter and its language.

No doubt, as a poet of Nature, Wordsworth stands supreme, for he is the worshipper of Nature, Nature's priest giving to Nature as independent status in poetry. As a poet of childhood, he idealized childhood, for in his words, the child sees in Nature a heavenly glory which a man cannot see. This is because the child is near Heaven with distinct memories of his heavenly life. The child is thus a "might philosopher or a "seer blest", an "eye among the child". All these views find a superb expression in the *Ode on the Intimations of Immortality*. As a narrative poet, he achieved distinction. A few notable narrative poems of his are *Ruth, Simon Lae, Hart-Leap Well, The Leech-Gatherer* or *Resolution and Independence* and *Michael*. As a metrist, his blank verse owes much to the Miltonic tradition and his gifts of language are matched by great skill and variety in the use of metre, though he does not possess the exquisite sense of rhythm of Spenser or Milton. His poetry has such essential features as revolutionary ardour, rationalism of William Godwin, Hartley's associationism, lyric gift, sense of poetic shape and structure, healing power, sense of life in natural objects, penetrative pathos, speculative idealism, faultless expression in higher imaginative moods, democratic sentiment and above all, mystic vision.

Wordsworth is unanimously acknowledging as a mystic. Mysticism involves the perception of a divine unity behind the ordinary physical world. The mystic sees a divine unifying life in all lives and considers all things in the visible world as manifestations of the one divine life. In the words of Spurgeon, "Wordsworth was not only poet, he was a seer and mystic and a practical psychologist with an amazingly subtle mind and an unusual capacity for feeling. It was not the beauty of Nature which brought him joy and peace, but the life in Nature. He himself had caught a vision of that life. He knew it and felt it and it transformed the whole of the existence for him". Wordsworth's mysticism is deeply rooted in his conception of Nature. For him, Nature has life and joy in herself; she is a manifestation of an 'active principle' which has its noblest seat in the mind of man. His senses, through which he communicates with Nature, feed his soul, being the chief inlets of soul in this age. That is why Wordsworth can say without hyperbole that Nature is the guardian of his heart and soul of all his moral being. Wordsworth's mystic creed is clearly discernible in the following lines:

"I seemed to learn
That what he see of forms and images
which float along our minds and what we feel
of active or recognizable thought,
Prospectiveness, or intellect or will,
Not only is not worthy to be deemed
Our being, to be prized as what we are,
But is the very littleness of life
Such consciousness I deem but accidents
Relapses from the one interior life
That lives in all things, sacred from the touch

Of that false secondary power by which
In weakness we create distinctions, then
Believe that all our puny boundaries are things
Which we perceive and not which we have made;
In which all beings live with God, themselves
Are God, existing in the mighty whole,
As indistinguishable as the cloudless East
At noon is from the cloudless West, when all
The hemisphere is one cerulean blue.”

Truly speaking, mysticism is an attitude of mind founded upon an intuitive or experienced conviction of unity, of oneness of likeness in all things. In the words of Sachithanandan, “Mystics are successful climbers of the spiritual Matterhorn who came back to report to us in highly symbolic language their ineffable experience” (P.28). People with a rationalistic and scientific bent of mind have questioned the genuineness of mystical experience. But it cannot be disbelieved since mystics from different ages and climates have described them identically Vedantic mysticism is the realization of the union between the individual soul (Jeevatma) and the Supreme Soul (Paramatma). V. Sachithanandan writes:

“The union is made possible by means of intuitive
sight gained through a study of the scriptures,
instruction of a Guru, practice of ethical
and spiritual disciplines, individual meditation
or direct intuitive experience” (P.28).

According to Advaita Karma, bhakti and jnana are the three progressive steps for the realization of Brahman. They do not stand separate but are complementary to one another. Bhakti yoga is the devotion to God and the renunciation of worldly objects. Jnana Yoga is the knowledge of spiritual insight. Bhakti Yoga is also the realization of God as the dwelling spiritual of love in all things. So, the mystic is one who identifies himself with the universe. He is supremely conscious of the immortal spirit pervading the whole universe.

Mysticism is an attitude held in literature also. Hafiz, Rumi, Donne, Blake, Wordsworth, Tagore and Whitman and Sri Aurobindo are some of the prominent mystic poets. Mysticism implies an awareness of the presence of God, an apprehension of something greater behind and within the world that senses see and know. The external universe speaks to the mystic poet through the senses to his soul. To him, Nature is animated and it has a life of its own, a soul, the same as that of man. He believes that whatever he sees around him are the different forms and manifestations of the one Divine life that the soul is external and all the others transient. While talking about the manifestation of divine presence in Nature as mystic vision, Stalknecht comments:

“Nature is a constant creation, a constant birth of a created being a manifestation of God. The world is the body of divine creation. This whole world is alive with God’s power. God creates through Nature in order to reveal or manifest himself. As Nature is the first birth or manifestation of God, or discovery of the Divine powers, so all creatures are the manifestations of the powers of Nature” (102).

Imagination may be described as one of the pre-condition of mystical awareness. It aids mystical intuition by achieving a concentration of mental power in one act of attention. For mystics like Jacob Boehme, William Law and others “imagination is an act of creation or expression whereby the human mind imitates or even perhaps participates in, the divine creation, which is also an imagination, for God creates in his images” (Stallknecht 33). Kant considers imagination, a mystery and Hume emphasizes imagination’s wonderful power of selection and combination of detail for the sake of expressing an idea. With Wordsworth, imagination has something of the mystical character. Christopher Salvesen evidently holds:

“Like Blake, he could see ‘a heaven in a wild
flower’ but his imagination never cuts him
off from contact with human life
and his poetry is it lacks the remarkness,
the strange thrill of Blake’s has a strength
and sanity, which mystics too often lack;
his wild flower has firm roots in
earth and running gab” (P.69).

An outstanding characteristic of the mystic experience is the difficulty of describing it. The person to whom it comes knows that something very wonderful has happened to him but cannot say what it is. A mystic is thoroughly antirational and antiscientific in temper. The word of sense perception has no meaning for him and he realises this truth not by reason but by intuition, by inspiration and by his mystic experiences. When experienced, he is in a mood of contemplation and meditation. Since the soul that animates in Nature is the same as that of man, it is possible to have communion with the soul of Nature. Wordsworth’s poetry is essentially mystical. While the mysticism of other men consists commonly in their effort to escape from the senses, the mysticism of Wordsworth is grounded and rooted in the senses. In his childhood and youth, the sense of the one life extending throughout Nature possessed Wordsworth and even exalted him, but it dazzled rather than enlightened his understanding. He looked for universal things and found ‘the one presence of Nature’ as the central object of his awareness.

Wordsworth’s whole being is an awareness of God, a union or communion in which all thought expires in blessedness and love. In the poem, “The Tintern Abbey”, Wordsworth calls this stable of the soul as the state of ‘the blessed mood’:

“In which the burthen of the mystery,
In which the heavy and the weary weight
of all this unintelligible world,
Is lightened: - that serene and blessed mood
until the breath of this corporeal frame
And even the motion of our human blood
Almost suspended, we are laid asleep
In body and become a living soul:
While with an eye made quiet by the power
of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
We see into the life of things”.

It is in this ‘blessed mood’ the poet holds communion with Nature. In this regard, S.A. Brooke’s words are worth quoting here:

“Between the spirit in Nature and the mind
of men, there is a prearranged harmony and
it is this harmony which enables Nature
to communicate its, own thoughts to
men and to effect upon them until a
union between them is established”. (P.26)

In this communion, he feels a presence which is common to men and Nature. To Wordsworth, the God in Man and in Nature is one. This idea is beautifully expressed in the lines that follow:

“I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
of something far more deeply interfused,
whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean, and the living air,
And the blue sky, and the mind of man;
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought
And rolls through all things” (Tintern Abbey 95-104).

In *The Prelude*, Wordsworth calls this ‘motion and a spirit’ as

“Wisdom and the spirit of the Universe;
The soul that is the Eternity of thought,
And givest to forms and images a breath
An everlasting motion”

Wordsworth also speaks of Nature in animistic, even in moralistic terms. Frequently, Wordsworth records an intense, mystical experience. But although deeply concerned with this rich and mysterious interior life, Wordsworth never ignores the outer senses or underestimates their importance as agents that can further spiritual enlightenment. “For Wordsworth and Boehme, the sense are to be scorned by the mystic and the nature love. The senses link the human mind to the world around it. It is through the senses that the activity and power of things come home to the mind” (Stallknecht 109). For Wordsworth, the feeling of unity with Nature came most evidently through the sense of sight. The poet Wordsworth is more sensitive to natural beauty than to other forms and he found the beauty of landscape the most satisfactory approach to mystical awareness. The beauty of Nature not only prepares the mystic for his vision but it often symbolizes or expresses the object or content of the mystical insight, which it fathers. Any object of great beauty may echo or reflect the eternal. Most of his mystical experiences are associated with natural beauty. He wrote:

“One impulse from a vernal wood
may teach you more of man
of moral evil and of good,
Then all the sages can”

These lines clearly suggest what Wordsworth thought of Nature. Wordsworth regarded Nature as his best teacher. ‘The Prelude’ is an account of the best part of the poet’s

education that he received from Nature. He was always grateful to Nature for the 'means' which she 'designed to employ' for the poet's intellectual and spiritual refinement. Nature exercised upon the poet the discipline of fear and joy. This discipline enabled the poet to feel Nature's presence in the background of all his activities:

"I heart among the solitary hills
Low breathings coming after me, and sounds
of undistinguishable motion, steps
Almost as silent as the turf they trod" (The Prelude, Book I Lines 322-325)

In his early life, Wordsworth realised the essential mystical value of Nature through sense impressions. He beautifully throws light on this aspect here in the lines:

"The eye – it cannot choose but see;
We cannot bid the ear be still;
Our bodies feel, where'er they be
Against or with our will.
Nor less I deem that there are powers
which of themselves our minds impress;
That we can feel this mind of ours
In a wise passiveness" (Expostulation of Reply Lines 17-24)

Wordsworth believes in the existence of soul, a spirit in Nature, which gives the various aspects of Nature a soul of their own. The poet also expresses the view that there is some sort of harmony between the spirit in Nature and the mind of man, and this harmony enables Nature to communicate its thoughts to man. By communion with Nature, one can realise the indwelling spirit in Nature. Because of the mystic vision, natural objects and individual persons are more precious rather than less. Wordsworth is

"A lover of the meadows and the woods
And mountains, and of all that we behold
From this green earth" (Tintern Abbey 103-105).

Wordsworth was intensely conscious of one life in all things. The unity and oneness of all makes the poet feel that all things are equal. All the things in the world are the creations of the Almighty and God manifests through his creations. That is why to him.

"The meanest flower that blows can give
Thoughts that like too deep for tears" (Immortality ode Lines 203-204)

The poem "Immortality Ode" gives utterance to Wordsworth's mystical vision. To the poet, the super-sensuous world appeared to be more real than the world of sense – perception. This idea is expressed in the following lines:

"Those obstinate questing,
of sense and outward things,
Fallings from us, vanishings,
Blank misgivings of a creature,
Moving about words not realised" (Lines 142-145)

In his conception of the existence of soul and its relation to the Divine soul also, Wordsworth shows himself as a mystic. Thus, it is seen that Wordsworth is inspired by mystical vision and reflects this vision in his poetic creations.

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